

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 27

NEWSWEEK  
5 May 1980

## The Plan: How It Failed

On a cool night in the Iranian desert, the American commandos had all but given up hope. One of the six big RH-53D helicopters, a vital part of their mission to rescue 53 American prisoners in Teheran, sat on the salt flats of the Desert One base area, hopelessly crippled. Back in Washington, Defense Secretary Harold Brown used a bright red "secure" telephone to call Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national-security adviser. "I think we have an abort situation," said Brown. Brzezinski rushed to Carter's hideaway office with the bad news: the commander of the rescue operation recommended that it be called off. Jimmy Carter mulled it over for just seven minutes, then announced simply: "I approve his recommendation."

The rescue mission aborted in flames and death when one of the big Sea Stallion helicopters collided with a C-130 transport plane on the ground while maneuvering to refuel. The evacuating Americans left behind a battlefield scene of burned, junked and abandoned equipment—and the bodies of eight marines and airmen. Their planning had been ingenious and their preparation meticulous. But the 180 rescuers—90 commandos and an equal number of air crew—were undone by an improbable run of bad luck. One by one, three carefully prepared helicopters had dropped out of action. More than 40 Iranian civilians had blundered into the Desert One camp as the American troops were arriving—and at least two had escaped with the momentous news. Then came the evacuation and the tragic, wasteful fireball that killed eight men and badly burned four others after the mission had been written off.

**Mountain Hide-out:** The Carter Administration was understandably sparing with the details of what would have happened next if the mission had not been aborted at Desert One. But sources told NEWSWEEK that the plan called for a ground assault on the U.S. Embassy in Teheran and on the Iranian Foreign Ministry less than a mile away, where three American diplomats had been cooped up since the start of the embassy siege. After refueling at Desert One, the helicopters were to have flown to a mountain hide-out east of Teheran to wait out the daylight hours. The C-130s would

leave Iran and later return to a separate base area outside the capital. The next night, the troops would drive to Teheran in vehicles "pre-positioned" by someone—perhaps U.S. intelligence agents or pro-American Iranians. The rescuers apparently expected to attack when the militants holding the embassy had relaxed their guard; there was speculation that the Americans intended to use nonlethal gas to neutralize the embassy guards.

Once the militants were overwhelmed and the U.S. hostages secured, the plan called for helicopters to land in the embassy compound and lift all the Americans out to a nearby airstrip where they would board

the C-130s for the flight to freedom. It seemed safe to assume that jet fighters from the carrier Nimitz, which had launched the helicopters from the Arabian Sea, would have flown to Teheran to provide air cover for the departing transports.

**Secret Meetings:** It was a bold plan, designed to hit Teheran unexpectedly—from the ground instead of the air and from the east instead of the west, the line of flight from friendly air bases in Turkey and Egypt. Jimmy Carter gave the order to go on April 11, and every morning thereafter, Brzezinski convened a secret meeting of senior mission managers, including Brown, Vice President Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, CIA director Stansfield Turner, White House aides Hamilton Jordan and Jody Powell and Gen. David Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The commandos had been selected within weeks after the embassy was seized last Nov. 4. The identity of the surviving raiders was still secret late last week, but sources said the team was drawn from the Blue Light unit at Fort Bragg, N.C., an anti-terrorist detachment set up in 1977. The commander of Blue Light is Army Col. Charles Beckwith, a Green Beret veteran of cross-border operations in Vietnam. Beckwith himself commanded the rescue party on the ground in Iran, reporting to the overall mission commander, Army Maj. Gen. James Vaught.

**Delta Project:** The difficult, unorthodox mission was nothing new to Colonel Beckwith. A big, bluff man known for his shouts of "Press on" in battle, Beckwith has spent most of his career in the shadowy world of "special warfare." Because of the secret na-

ture of his work, the Pentagon will divulge little information about him; according to one old chum, Charles Mohr of The New York Times, "even his middle name is classified." In Vietnam, he once commanded the Delta Project, a force of Vietnamese, Cambodian and ethnic Chinese mercenaries recruited by Special Forces and paid by the CIA for irregular missions.

\* \* \* \*

**Fiery Collision:** At Desert One, the American commandos were preparing to evacuate when frustration turned to tragedy. Moving into position to refuel, one helicopter rose 15 to 20 feet into the air and began to taxi around a troop-carrying C-130 toward a tanker plane on the other side. In the darkness, the helicopter pilot apparently was unaware of how close he was to the troop carrier. While banking sharply to the left to complete the turn, the helicopter's rotor blade slashed through the fuselage of the C-130 at precisely the point dividing the crew and cargo compartments. The C-130 was neatly sliced in two. The commandos in back managed to rescue an Air Force cargo master pinned in the wreckage by the helicopter's rotor. Then they bolted out the rear door just before their transport and the helicopter burst into flames.

The five Air Force crewmen in the cockpit of the C-130 never had a chance. The three Marine crewmen in the back of the helicopter also died, but the pilot was thrown clear and was among the four men badly burned. The fire set off ammunition aboard both aircraft. As explosions and shrapnel ripped through the night, Colonel Beckwith ordered crewmen to evacuate the remaining four helicopters, which were brimming with fuel and liable to explode in a chain reaction. In the dangerous circumstances, the rescue team did not pause to destroy the helicopters, but piled into the remaining C-130s and took off for Egypt. Later, Pentagon officials admitted that some classified equipment and documents may have been left behind as well—possibly including the plans for taking the embassy in Teheran.

CONTINUED